*Support Build Back Better Anti-Poverty & $35 Billion for Child Nutrition Investments*

October 25, 2021

To the Honorable Members of Washington's Congressional Delegation:

We, the 53 undersigned organizations and public officials, urge you to make critical investments in our children and working families by supporting and protecting the anti-poverty investments, including child nutrition, in the Build Back Better budget reconciliation bill. These priorities collectively are a historic opportunity to make generation-changing impacts on our nation's children and advance our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The sooner Congress comes to an agreement to pass a strong Build Back Better, the sooner families in our state will benefit from its important investments.

COVID-19 created widespread food insecurity for millions of people, and it exacerbated food insecurity for households that have been long left behind due to systemic and historical racism. According to University of Washington's COVID-19 WA Food Study, households of color were 1.5 times more likely to experience hunger than their White peers. The study specifically targeted Latinx, Black, Indigenous, and lower income households and found that **1 in 7 of these households are experiencing the most severe food insecurity**[1].

We firmly believe that Washington's food insecurity rates are intolerable - *and* we know it would be far worse were it not for Congress's quick, robust response to expand resources to help struggling households get the food that they need. This has included temporary increases to SNAP benefits; free school meals and investments in schools' nutrition services; Pandemic EBT (modeled on Summer EBT pilots) to help low income students' families buy groceries; and, the expanded Child Tax Credit.

Increased participation in school breakfast and lunch bolsters academic performance and improves children's health and their ability to focus on challenging tasks and learning. Investing directly in our school nutrition programs - with kitchen equipment grants and other quality improvements - will improve school meals while fostering lifelong, healthier habits. In years of pilot project evaluations, Summer EBT for kids has shown to reduce food insecurity and to mitigate the impact of summer learning loss so that students are better prepared when they return to school. Additionally, Summer EBT helps families buy food for the table while boosting local economies, generating revenue

[1] UW/WSU WA Food Study Brief 11
https://nutr.uw.edu/resource/wafood-brief-11-special-research-brief-food-security-and-barriers-to-food-assistance-use-in-washington-state-households-2020-2021/

for grocery retailers and local farmers. Together, these programs have produced quick and critical positive results for kids and their families by cutting child hunger and reducing child poverty.

**With Build Back Better, Congress has the opportunity now to continue these investments that have proved to lower food insecurity and cut child poverty. We urge Congress to protect the current plan that invests in strategies that can disrupt generational poverty and open pathways to opportunity and economic stability for families in crisis. After the House cut $10 billion from its initial child nutrition provisions, Congress should pass a Build Back Better package that protects the remaining investments in proven strategies to end child hunger. We ask that the final budget reconciliation maintain the following provisions:**

**<u>Bolster access to healthy and free school meals for low income kids</u>:**

- Expand the number of high need schools that can offer free meals to all students using the **Community Eligibility Provision** by lowering the eligibility threshold to 25% and increasing the multiplier (from 1.6 to 2.5) used to determine federal reimbursement a CEP school receives. **In Washington, 548,000 children at high need schools (nearly double) would get free meals through CEP**.
- Allow states the option to implement the Community Eligibility Provision statewide.
- Allow all states to use Medicaid data to directly certify children for free school meals, as Washington has been doing successfully as part of a multi-state pilot.
- Provide $500 million for **school kitchen equipment grants** to improve meal quality.
- Provide $634 million for **Healthy School Meal Incentives** demonstration projects.

**<u>Provide summertime grocery assistance for low income families with children</u>:**

- Extend the **Summer EBT pilot nationwide** so children who qualify for free or reduced price school meals get food benefits that work like SNAP when school meals aren't available. Summer EBT builds on existing national evaluations demonstrating it reduces child summer hunger by up to 30% as well as building on the needed systems that have been developed for Pandemic EBT. I**n Washington, nearly half of all students would qualify for this benefit of $375 per child for purchasing groceries over the summer.**

**The final budget reconciliation must maintain the proposed investment of $35 billion in the child nutrition provisions.**

**<u>Reduce child poverty</u>:**

- **Expand Child Tax Credits** to ensure all families have the support they need to raise healthy, thriving children with the flexibility to meet their unique family's needs. Providing child tax credits ensures a simple way for all families to respond to family and local conditions effectively - and cut child poverty by more than 40%, ending child poverty for millions of American kids.

These provisions take important steps forward to help our children have the fuel they need to focus on learning, improve their health, and bolster academic performance. These investments also help close years of opportunity gaps - particularly for children of color. In combination with other anti-poverty provisions, like the critical Child Tax Credit extension, the combined result is an investment in ending child hunger and laying the foundation for a healthier, more productive future when more of our children have better opportunities to thrive. A vote for a robust Build Back Better plan is a vote to help Washington's children, families and communities succeed and make the economy work for everyone.

Sincerely,

**Elected Officials**
The Honorable State Representative April Berg
The Honorable Jenny A. Durkan, City of Seattle Mayor
The Honorable State Representative David Hackney
The Honorable State Representative Marcus Riccelli
The Honorable State Representative Sharon Shemake

**Statewide Organizations**
Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition
Catholic Community Services of Western Washington
Children's Alliance
Faith Action Network
Feeding Washington
Moms Rising
National Association of Social Workers- Washington Chapter
Northwest Harvest
Nutrition First
Partners for Our Children
Statewide Poverty Action Network
Washington Education Association
Washington Food Coalition
Washington Low Income Housing Alliance

Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility
Washington State Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

**Regional Organizations**
Food Lifeline
Public Defender Association

**Local/County Organizations**
Asian Pacific Islander Coalition- Yakima County
Be: Seattle
Bellingham Food Bank
Cedar Park Elementary PTA
Cham Refugees Community
Chelan Douglas Community Action Council
City of Seattle
Community Wellness Project
Council on Aging & Human Services- Colfax County
Emergency Food Network
Food Bank Farm and Gardens of Jefferson County
Hunger Intervention Program
Jefferson County Farmers Markets
Jefferson County Food Bank Association
Justice Peace Council of Seattle Mennonite Church
Lake City Partners Ending Homelessness
Lake Forest Park Citizens' Commission
Literary Source
North Helpline
PJALS
Port Angeles Food Not Bombs
Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness
Seattle Neighborhood Farmers Markets
Solid Ground
St. John Food Pantry
Tacoma Urban League
Toppenish Community Chest
United Way of King County
University District Food Bank
Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle